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A Moorestown woman walked through the halls of Congress last week, lobbying for something far more important to her than a political favor.

For three days, Judith Young visited the offices of 250 of the 435 members of the House of Representatives.

A determined Young was trying to find more co-sponsors for a House bill that would establish a national monument to honor mothers who have lost sons and daughters in service to the country.

Young is chairwoman of the newly formed Gold Star Mothers National Monument Foundation, Inc., and past national president of the American Gold Star Mothers.

"The Gold Star Mothers National Monument Act of 2009 is an opportunity to honor those mothers who have given so much -- their children who gave up their tomorrows -- so that we can enjoy today," said Young. She lost her son Jeffrey at 22 in the 1983 terrorist bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks at Beirut International Airport in Lebanon with 268 other Marines, soldiers and sailors on a peacekeeping mission.

"I do this in memory of him; I honor him by doing things for the organization and the veterans councils I serve on."

The foundation she heads is in the early stages of its campaign for a national monument. It has raised \$150,000 and already has a prototype statue, the first of which was erected by the state of New York in Putnam County, N.Y. Other states like New Hampshire are raising money for their own state statue.

The prototype statue in New York depicts a tearful World War II mother leaning one hand on a table to steady herself while her other hand holds a telegram bearing the news of her son's death in the war. An identical statue would be the focus of the Washington, D.C., monument.

If legislation introduced Dec. 9 by Rep. John H. Adler, D-N.J., is passed by Congress and signed by the president, the National Park Service would designate a site somewhere in Washington, D.C. She said the bill, HR-4197, has 14 co-sponsors so far and has been assigned to the Natural Resources Committee.

Young said she hopes the entire process from approval to erection will take no longer than five years, but she said no one can really say now how long it will take. The cost depends on how much land is allotted, but a more elaborate setting for the statue could cost upward of \$1 million, she said.

In her visits on Capitol Hill, Young said she left each congressman and congresswoman an

updated brochure about the memorial project and got the names and e-mail addresses of congressional aides who dealt with natural resources issues.

"Since the inception of our nation, brave men and women have battled at home and abroad to protect our safety and freedom," said Adler, whose district includes Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, which is partially in Burlington County. "This monument will allow a grateful nation to honor the families of those service members who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country."

Young said her goal is to get 250 co-sponsors so the bill can more easily be released from the Natural Resources Committee for a floor vote without a formal hearing. Otherwise, the bill is subject to the committee and subcommittee process with debate prior to committee votes.

"I was pretty tired afterward and my feet were killing me from the shoes I wore the first day, but this is all worth it," said the Gold Star mother. She also founded the Beirut Connection support group for families of the bombing victims and has served as a trustee of the Beirut Veterans Association.

The Gold Star tradition dates to World War I and 1918 when President Woodrow Wilson approved the wearing of a black arm patch with a gold star to signify the mourning of a loved one who died serving the country.

Homes, businesses and churches hung service flags in the windows of their homes to represent family or organization members serving in the war. A blue star on the flag symbolized a living service member while a gold star came to represent one who had lost his life. The Gold Star Mothers organization was formed in 1928.

Today, the name Gold Star Mother refers to any American woman who has lost a son or daughter in service to the United States.

Young said the star tradition waned after World War II but was resurrected after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. Her gold star usually hangs on the front door of her home across New Albany Road from the memorial park named by the township for son, Jeffrey Young.

She said the national executive board of Gold Star Mothers decided on a national monument in 2004.

"I was the one who dedicated the first statue in New York in 2005, so I kind of felt it was up to me to take on this project," she said. "I was stepping down from the board of the Gold Star Mothers and really felt like I should be the one to lead this effort."

She said the mothers group had a lot of new, younger members who had just lost children in Iraq and Afghanistan and she didn't think they would be interested yet in spearheading the national monument effort.

She said there have been more than 250,000 Gold Star Mothers since World War I.

With more than 200,000 American troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, Adler said parents all across the country anxiously wait for these sons and daughters to return home.

"This Gold Star monument will pay tribute to the bravery and sacrifice," he said.

Last week was the third time Young has visited Capitol Hill. Last year she said she delivered an earlier Gold Star monument brochure to the offices of 250 lawmakers who had supported bills for military veterans because she thought this bill would be assigned to the military affairs committee. Instead, the bill went to the Natural Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over the National Park Service.

"So I decided I better make another visit to let them all know what had happened," she said, "and I plan to visit senators later this year.

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Additional Facts

HOW TO HELP

Monument donations may be made to the Gold Star Mothers National Monument Foundation, 4401-A Connecticut Ave. NW #343, Washington, D.C. 20008. For more information, call (856) 235-6918 or (610) 328-1557.